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ABSTRACT

Violence among youth has reached epidemic proportions. Every five minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime. To understand this trend, this paper examines characteristics of adolescent males who come into contact with the juvenile justice system. The study focuses on drug and alcohol involvement, the relevance of education, sexual practices, and sensitivity to violence. It is believed that comprehending the attitudes and perceptions of aggressive, undersocialized youth will foster violence prevention and it is hoped that identifying the factors that place juvenile delinquents at risk will help in the development of treatment programs. For this study, 202 males, ages 12-18, filled out three instruments and provided demographic information. Results indicate that juvenile offenders share a number of characteristics: single-parent households headed by the mother; siblings or parents who have been involved in the legal system; the use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana at an early age; weekly $1,000 earnings selling crack; a friend who sells drugs; achievement in mathematics; high rates of suspension and expulsion; no aspiration for higher education; early sexual activity; and weapons ownership. A number of intervention strategies, particularly community-based programs, are recommended. (RJM)

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Predictors of Juvenile Delinquency and Violence

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Predictors of Juvenile Delinquency and Violence

Introduction

Violence among youth has reached epidemic proportions. Every five minutes, a child is arrested for a violent crime. Every two hours, a child is murdered. In a single day, 13 children die from guns, and 30 more are wounded; 5,703 teenagers are victims of violent crime; 2,350 juveniles are in adult jails; and 1,200,000 latchkey children come home to houses in which there is a gun (Children's Defense Fund, 1993). According to a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) survey, one in five high school-age children--one in three boys--has carried some type of weapon in the past month, and up to 135,000 guns are carried into schools each day (USA Today, 1991). Violent crime has increased 43% since 1980 and six-fold since 1960 (American Legislative Exchange Council, 1994). In 1992, juveniles were responsible for 17.5% of all violent crime arrests. Between 1990 and 1992, the number of juveniles under age 15 arrested for violent crimes increased 25% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994). However, despite a plethora of research in the area of violence and aggression, we still do not understand why our youth continue to become involved in and victimized by violent acts.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of this ongoing study is to examine the characteristics of adolescent males who come into contact with the juvenile justice system and to assess their attitudes and perceptions on a number of relevant dimensions. These dimensions include: drug and alcohol involvement, relevance of education, sexual practices, and sensitivity to violence.

It is believed that an understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of aggressive, undersocialized youth will have implications for confronting the rising concerns about violence among today's youth. Also, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the knowledge base relating to juvenile delinquents by determining factors which place them at risk, thus helping to identify effective treatment programs and ultimately reducing the overall rate of incarceration.

Method

Subjects

Two hundred and two adolescent males, aged 12-18, participated in the study. The sample was drawn randomly from the population of juveniles incarcerated at correctional facilities located in a large southeastern (n = 82) and a mid-southern state (n = 120).

Instruments and Procedure

Three instruments were administered to each participant: The Lifestyles, Attitudes, and Perceptions Survey (LAPS), the Violence Attribution Survey (VAS) and the Attitude Towards Violence Survey (ATVS), all devised by the researchers for the present study. In addition, demographic information was collected on all participants from the facilities' databases.

The LAPS is an 86-item questionnaire consisting of a series of open- and closed-ended questions designed to examine the juveniles' attitudes and perceptions regarding a variety of life issues. The LAPS examines

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several domains, including drug use, sexual behavior, life expectancies, and attitudes towards women.

The VAS is a 12-item questionnaire designed to assess attributions made by the juveniles for the behavior of others involved in a variety of violent acts. Each item consists of a vignette, followed by three possible attributions (person, stimulus, and circumstance) presented in multiple-choice format, and an open-ended question asking the subjects' reason for choosing the response which they did. The vignettes are constructed in such a way as to allow for the perceived plausibility of any one of the three possible attributions.

The ATVS is a 16-item instrument designed to assess the juveniles' attitudes toward verbal and physical acts of aggression in both passive and active contexts. Each item consists of a hypothetical situation, followed by Likert-type scales in which the juveniles are asked a) to assess the degree of violence of the act (sensitivity toward violence) and b) to report the frequency with which they would engage in similar behavior if they were sure of not being punished (propensity toward violence).

According to the Flesch Readability Scale (Flesch, 1951), all instruments were suitable for readers at a fifth-grade level. Although participants were provided with the actual instrument, each question was read aloud by one of the researchers in order to control for variation in reading skills. Subjects were required to write their responses on the survey forms.

Preliminary Results

Presented here are findings pertaining to the 82 juveniles incarcerated at the southeastern site.

The southeastern sample comprised 40 (49%) violent and 42 (51%) nonviolent offenders. The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, 77% of the sample was black. The majority of the offenders (91%) were aged 14-17 years. Only 22% of the offenders had a father in the home. In 62% of the cases, the mother was the sole caregiver.

DRUG/ALCOHOL USE:

Fifty-five percent of the children in the sample had taken their first drink by age 11, and all had used alcohol by age 16. Seventy-nine percent reported tobacco use, and 85% indicated that they had tried marijuana. The median age for first tobacco use was 11; for marijuana, 12. Indeed, 45% ($p < .001$) of the variance in the age of first marijuana use was predicted by the age of first tobacco use. Less than 7% of the children had experimented with glue, gas, LSD, heroin, cocaine, or crack.

Eighty-five percent of the children had sold drugs. Of those, 87% had sold crack; yet only one child reported using crack. The median income reported from drug sales was $975 per week. Thirty-four percent of the children had family members who sold drugs; of those, 55% were immediate family members. Finally, 89% of the children had at least one friend who sold drugs.

EDUCATION/CAREERS:

Seventy-one percent of the children reported liking school. Of those, only 22% liked school because they enjoy learning; another 27% reported social reasons (e.g., friends, girls) for liking school. Overall,

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a significantly higher ($p < .001$) percentage of boys who liked school (97%) than those who did not (53%) rated school as being important.

Seventy-four percent of the children listed math as their first or second favorite subject. The most frequent reasons for choosing math were "fun/enjoyment," being "good at it," or finding it "interesting/helpful." Fifty-eight percent reported getting their best grades in math. Conversely, only 18 percent listed reading as their first or second favorite subject, and 52% of the sample reported doing no recreational reading.

Thirty-six percent had been suspended from school more than five times. Sixty-four percent had been expelled at least once, with 49% having been expelled up to three times. Compared with boys who did not see the value of education, boys who rated school as important reported significantly fewer ($p < .05$) suspensions (mean = 10 vs. mean = 17) and expulsions (mean = 1 vs. mean = 4).

Although 85% of the sample acknowledged the importance of schooling, only 36% listed a good education as providing the best chance for income, stability, and growth. Alternatively, playing sports was listed by 33%, and selling drugs by 18%.

When asked what job/career they would like to have, 22% responded that they would like to play sports for a living. Only 18% listed a job requiring higher education. Eighteen percent of the sample indicated that they most probably would support themselves selling drugs after finishing high school. Only 8% saw themselves attending college.

Finally, the majority of the sample rated their family as having the biggest influence on their decision-making, with friends and church being the second and third most influential sources, respectively. In comparison, school had a minimal impact.

SEXUAL PRACTICES:

Forty-eight percent of the boys reported having only one girlfriend currently, whereas 37% reported having two or more. Age at first intercourse ranged from 6 to 15 years (all boys having had intercourse by age 15), with a median age of 11. Sixty-four percent of the children reported having had more than five sex partners; 45% reported more than 10.

Seventy-five percent of the boys reported that they did not use a condom during their first sexual encounter; 45% did not use a condom the last time they had sex. Thirty-one percent of the sample reported never or seldom using condoms. Those who used condoms at first and/or last intercourse tended to use condoms more frequently ($p < .001$). At first intercourse, 86% of the boys' partners did not use any type of birth control; at last intercourse, 62% did not use birth control. Forty-two percent had fathered at least one child. Four of the boys reported two pregnancies.

Only 34% of the sample thought it was possible for them to contract AIDS. Neither consistency of condom use nor condom use at first or last coitus was a good predictor of fear of AIDS.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics (n = 82)

Violent = 49% Non-violent = 51%

White = 23% Black = 77%

Age		Grade	
12	1%	6	10%
13	7%	7	24%
14	16%	8	17%
15	18%	9	38%
16	36%	10	7%
17	21%	11	3%
18	1%	12	1%

Special Education

EMD - 7% LD - 7% ED - 10%

Family Income

<$5,000	27%
$5,000-$9,999	24%
$10,000-$14,999	18%
$15,000-$19,999	4%
$20,000-$24,999	7%
>$25,000	20%

Living Arrangements

Natural mother	62%
Natural father	12%
Both parents	10%
Others	16%

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Table 1 (Cont\d...)

Sample Characteristics (n = 82)

Median family size	4
Parents or siblings with criminal records	82%
Prior arrest record	88%
Currently expelled from school	18%
Not attending school by choice	7%
Employed at time of arrest	5%

WEAPONS/GANGS:

Eighty-eight percent of the boys reported owning a gun. Thirty-two percent reported carrying a gun to school. Of these, 54% indicated that they brought the gun for "protection," whereas 23% brought it "to kill someone." Twenty-seven percent of the children had brought some other type of weapon to school.

A quarter of the sample reported membership in gangs. With regard to attitudes toward gangs, 74% of the boys held negative views. Of these, a higher proportion were non-gang members than were gang members (89% vs. 11%; $p < .001$). Although there was not a significant relationship between gun ownership and gang membership, significantly more ($p < .001$) gang members (53%) than non-gang members (12%) tended to carry guns to school.

Those with at least one family member in a gang tended to initiate cigarette use ($r = -.70$) and marijuana use ($r = -.55$) earlier. Additionally, both of these factors (family membership in gangs and early substance use) were significant ($p < .001$) predictors of gang membership for the children in the sample.

Attributions Toward Violence

Responses to the 12 items of the VAS were averaged in order to produce an index of attribution toward violence (range 0-2), with a mean closest to 0 suggesting a high percentage of person attributions, a mean closest to 1 suggesting a high percentage of stimulus attributions, and a mean closest to 2 suggesting a high percentage of circumstance attributions. No significant difference ($p > .05$) was found between violent and non-violent offenders with respect to attributions toward violence (Table 2).

The binomial test was applied to the frequency counts for each item. This was done by pooling the external attributions (stimulus and circumstance) and comparing them to the dispositional attributions (person). Both violent and nonviolent offenders were found to make significantly less ($p < .05$) person attributions than stimulus and circumstance attributions in five of the 12 vignettes.

A content analysis was performed on item responses to open-ended questions in order to ascertain recurrent themes and potential sources of attributional error. The seven themes which emerged from these responses are presented in Table 3.

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Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and t-Values by Offender Group

Scale	Violent Offenders (n=40) Mean (SD)	Nonviolent Offender (n=42) Mean (SD)	t
Attributions Toward Violence	0.57 (0.31)	0.67 (0.23)	1.77
Sensitivity to Violence	2.54 (0.53)	2.46 (0.59)	-0.65
Propensity to Repeat Violent Act	1.82 (0.78)	1.88 (0.72)	0.36

Table 3

Open-ended Response Categories With Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Attributions

Open-ended response category	Attribution Category	Example
1. Self-control	Person	"He should've been able to control himself."
2. Violation of rights	Person	"Nobody wants to be raped."
3. Provocation	Stimulus	"Tom was picking at him."
4. Irresponsibility	Person	"Shaq could've covered up his test."
5. Poor Judgment	Stimulus	"Shouldn't have got drunk.'
6. Fate	Circumstance	"Wrong place at the wrong time."
7. Conflict resolution	Circumstance	"They need to work it out."

Attitudes Toward Violence

Responses to the 16 items of the two scales of the ATVS were averaged in order to produce an index of sensitivity toward violence (range 0-4; with high scores suggesting a sensitivity toward violence), and propensity toward violence (range 0-4; with low scores suggesting a low propensity toward violence). No significant difference ($p > .05$) was found between violent and non-violent offenders with respect to either sensitivity toward violence or propensity toward violence (Table 2).

Discussion

Although the findings from this study are preliminary, a number of tentative conclusions can be made pertaining to at-risk youth. It would appear that characteristics of juvenile offenders tend to include the

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following: come from single-parent households headed by the mother; have siblings or parents who have been involved with the legal system; initiate the use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana at an early age; earn, on average, $1,000 per week selling crack (although they don't use it); have at least one friend who sells drugs; like and do well in mathematics; do not read; have high rates of suspension and expulsion; do not aspire to higher education; initiate sexual activity early; have had a number of sex partners; report infrequent condom use; do not appear to fear AIDS; and own weapons. These results bear a number of important implications. Firstly, it would appear that a cycle of family delinquency exists within this population. Thus, family members cannot be relied upon to prevent their children from becoming involved in crime. Rather, effective interventions are needed, which seek to educate not only at-risk youth, but also their family members. Education of this population could include conflict resolution programs, which emphasize non-violent settlements as well as an awareness of the consequences of criminal activity.

Additionally, in light of the findings that family, peer, and church are more influential than is school, these interventions should take the form of community-based programs which seek to impact upon the entire family unit. With respect to school, it is important that educators make all subjects as relevant and interesting as mathematics appears to be to this population. Particularly, reading instruction should not only focus on competence, but also on enjoyment, since lack of reading was identified as a predictor of delinquency. In addition, at risk youth need to feel that higher education is a realistic option. Finally, the importance of education regarding birth control and sexually-transmitted diseases cannot be overstated.

With respect to attitudes and attributions toward violence, the results of this study suggest that both violent and non-violent juvenile offenders tend to make attributional errors when evaluating the behavior of others. Specifically, the current sample frequently ascribed external explanations to individuals' violent actions. This finding however, should be interpreted with caution, since comparison with a non-offender control group has yet to be undertaken. Additionally, findings of no significance relative to attitudinal and attributional differences between the violent and non-violent offenders may be attenuated once further data is collected. Continued investigation, utilizing measures of self-esteem, attitudes and attributions toward violence, attitudes toward women, and information on lifestyles and perceptions is currently underway. It is believed that synthesis of the findings from the present and ongoing studies will render important implications for confronting the rising concerns about violence among today's youth and contribute to the knowledge base relating to juvenile offenders and the factors which place them at risk.

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